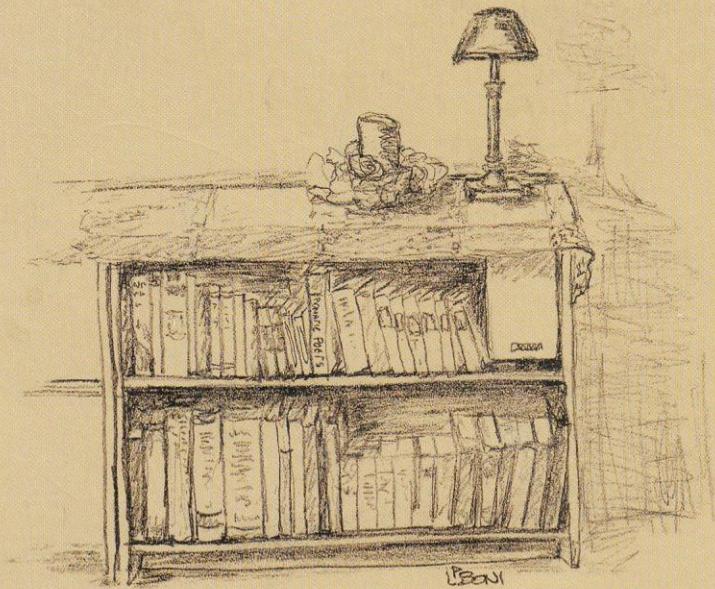


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SUNIL SETHI in
conversation with 30 famous writers

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Shobhaa Dé



One of the main transitions in Shobhaa Dé's varied and colourful life as successful model, editor, columnist and author is that from creating celebrities she became one, and from writing racy fiction she has, in the popular imagination, assumed some of the attributes of a quasi-fictional character. In real life, Shobhaa Dé (b. 1948) is energetic, feisty, often funny, and glamorous in the manner of a carefully groomed, mature rock star or diva—cascades of glossy hair, outsize shades, bold printed saris and chunky jewellery.

Once at a book fair in Europe, where she was promoting paperback translations of her fiction, piled high behind her in stacks, I began my piece to camera by saying, 'And here they are calling Shobhaa Dé the Jackie Collins of India . . .' She grabbed the mike from my hand, looked directly into the camera lens, and quipped, 'You're quite wrong. It's in LA that they call Jackie Collins the Shobhaa Dé of America . . .'

As a conservative civil servant's daughter, Shobhaa Dé had an old-fashioned upbringing. She broke into Mumbai's modelling world while an undergraduate at St. Xavier's College and became a much sought-after face of advertising campaigns in the 1970s. Switching to journalism, she made a name as editor of magazines such as *Stardust*, *Society* and *Celebrity*, a widely read columnist and, latterly, a blogger. Her foray into fiction began with *Socialite Evenings* (1989) and continued with several steamy best-sellers including *Starry Nights* (1989) and *Sultry Days* (1994) that earned her the sobriquet of 'Sultana of Sleaze'. Twice-married, with six children, she has produced non-fiction as prolifically: a memoir titled *Selective Memory* (1998), a book of letters *Speedpost* (1999), her views on marriage in *Spouse* (2005) and, casting her net wider in *Superstar India* (2008), on changing India as she turned sixty.

These two interviews, conflated as one, took place in Delhi and Mumbai following the publication of *Spouse* and *Superstar India*.

Your last book *Speedpost*, promoted by the Indian post office, were letters to your children about the problems of parents with adolescents. You were a sort of agony aunt, and now with *Spouse*, you have turned marriage counsellor. Why?

It seemed like a natural progression. Marriage has fascinated me for a very long time. We live in a very marriage-obsessed society and it was the right book at the right time for the right audience.

Somehow one doesn't connect Shobhaa Dé with the institution of marriage. After fiction like *Sultry Days* and *Starry Nights*, one may think you were up to everything outside marriage?

Oh dear. I'm so sorry to disappoint all those people getting vicarious thrills fantasizing about my life. But the truth is that fiction is what liberates you from your own conformist, conventional thinking and living, and a lot of people who write fiction perhaps don't venture into non-fiction, which I have, and I enjoy it. Non-fiction is where I put my opinions on the line. Fiction is fantasy.

In *Spouse* you emerge as a sort of neo-con on marriage. You almost advocate arranged marriages over love marriages and you say the joint family system is terrific. So much easier, you say, for someone else to roast baingan for baingan bharta.

I really believe that was the strength of the whole institution of marriages in India. It allowed young couples to discover themselves without the stress and pressure that they seem to be encountering now. They had support systems. It was a comfort zone and there were elders to guide them when they went wrong, who could soften the blows and absorb little things that require adjustments in the early years of marriage. There was someone to take care of the babies. Young people today are not going into marriage because they don't want the responsibility of a child. Where is the time for working couples? They don't have time for sex, forget the babies.

So will the institution of marriage survive?

It's a tough call. Women have driven this change largely, not just in India, but all over the world. Marriage is no longer a meal ticket. They no longer need marriage as a security blanket.

Meal ticket or male ticket?

Meal and male both actually, you are right. They are saying, why marriage? They can have relationships outside marriage that society no longer condemns. They are earning their own money, they don't need a man to support them. Soon, they won't even need a man to make a baby. They can get it off a test tube. Why do they actually need men at all? But you do want someone to cuddle up with at night.

A lot of the early part of *Spouse* has a touchy-feely tone about keeping marriages going, all cuddles and cooing chat. Is that the foundation of a good marriage?

I completely believe it is because there is a four-letter word; it's not the one we are all thinking about but actually it's called 'talk' and most marriages today are collapsing because there isn't enough investment in 'talk'. What I see young couples discussing is exchange of quick information 'Where you going?', 'I am going to be there', 'What time do we catch up?', 'We have to go there tonight', 'We don't have to go there', 'Cancel that', 'Fix that' ...

I call them the Post-it marriages because a lot of it is non-verbal. It's just little notes stuck on the refrigerator. They know so little about each other's emotional rhythms and physical rhythms. There is no time to connect physically, psychologically and emotionally, so what are they doing with one another?

Love is the bedrock of good marriages, according to you. That's tricky. What about that thin line between love and lust?

Keeping lust on the boil is tricky, I agree. There's a Gujarati saying which, roughly translated, says that the only true image of a marriage is the one provided by the quilt that covers the couple, because the quilt gives you the true picture of any marriage. I think sex is a vital and a key component. If you don't have great sex, chances are that it is just a companionship.

There is a chapter in your book called 'Raat Baki, Baat Baki' which touches upon other subjects such as adultery. How do you suggest handling adultery in modern life?

I have never seen a marriage survive in its wholeness or in its beauty after an adulterous affair. It's not that it's not possible. I see a lot of

'S' stands for superstition and, yes, Shobhaa begins with 's' but, more than that, it has a nice resonance. I am very visually vulnerable. 'S' has always worked for me whether it was when I began *Stardust*, *Society* and *Savvy*. As far as the additional 'a' goes, it has again more to do with visual imagery. I had six 'Shobhas' in my class. I felt I didn't have an identity to call my own because we were 'Shobha 1', 'Shobha 2', 'Shobha 3' etc. The additional 'a' makes that Shobhaa—a name I really hate and loathe—stand apart from the garden-variety Shobha. That's all.

December 2005

Your fifteenth book, *Superstar India*, in your sixtieth year almost coincides with India turning sixty. India has changed dramatically in these sixty years but how has Shobhaa Dé changed?

I think the most dramatic change is an inward-looking phase of my life. At the same time I want to break the whole stereotype of women at sixty. I want to say that life can begin in your sixth decade and it can easily be the most productive decade of your life, if you will it. I have always broken through familiar moulds, which I find boring, and I hope I remain as unpredictable at sixty, and more so, than ever before. I have always gone with my inner voice, like Sonia Gandhi, and followed my feelings, my gut instinct and done what my heart compels me to do.

There is a story you tell in your autobiography, *Selective Memory*, about a woman online asking you how you preserved yourself. What did you say to her?

In vinegar, of course, that I soak myself in a tub full of vinegar. And she went on to ask, 'Do you also splash it on your face?' and I said, 'Five times a day.' Now that I have turned sixty a lot of women come up and ask me the same thing. Very recently in Goa, there was someone, a fashion designer I might add, who stared at my back and at my neck, and said that Botox fixes the face but what have you done to your back? I am beginning to feel like a bit of a museum piece or a medical miracle and very soon I am going to start charging tickets.

have to find out!

Your public may regard you as a sacred or profane monster at sixty, but your first phase of fame came with the creation of *Stardust* magazine in the 1970s. You were its editor for over ten years. How and why did *Stardust* give film writing and film gossip a new break?

Bollywood was not what it is now and showbiz without masala, without scandal, without gossip, is not showbiz. Showbiz goes hand in hand with all that *Stardust* eventually chronicled. At that time we only had PR journalism, and we have gone back to PR journalism again because of commercial interests. *Stardust* broke all the rules. It was witty and stylish, ahead of its time, and the film industry took its own time to get used to the idea.

After *Stardust* you entered a phase in the 1980s when you were badly down on your luck. You were jobless with little money. *Celebrity* magazine that you started didn't take off, you had to sell it, your marriage broke up and you had to completely reinvent yourself from scratch. People may imagine that Shobhaa Dé had it easy but it wasn't so.

True. Shall I just be very honest and say that those turning points reminded me of my own strengths and there was not a moment, even during the lowest period, when I felt defeated. I was never a martyr and I never saw myself as a victim, which is what I keep telling women today. All of us are entitled to make some mistakes in our lives and we do. But how you cope with them is what defines your character. So I was never down and out and, like Scarlett O'Hara, I said there is always a tomorrow. I lived for that and I worked very hard to get on top of things all over again.

One of the things you chronicle in your current book are the incredible changes in the Indian media. How has it changed in your opinion?

I would say media has lost its teeth, its claws are missing and the fire in the belly is gone. There is no such thing as dissent, no informed opinion, not enough background research and no investigative journalism worth the name. Journalism and journalists have been co-opted into the system, so there's nothing anti-establishment left. There is no anger, no outrage and no angst.

Another issue that concerns you is the new materialism. Your social commentary and books are devoted to the faults of the get-rich-quick and spend-it-quicker generation of the urban young and you contrast it to the way you were brought up. What's the difference between your children's attitudes and yours?

For example, my nineteen-year-old is so brand-obsessed. She says, 'Oh, Mom, please stop it. We are all like that.' And she is probably right and maybe I am missing the point. But does that stop me from nagging? No it doesn't. Waste is something that I feel very strongly about because we were brought up to value water resources, never keep the tap on while brushing our teeth, switch off lights and fans when we left the room and never waste a morsel of food on our plate. Meat and fish were Sunday treats, never taken for granted. All that has gone with the 'me' generation. Now it's all about themselves, their personal goals and personal targets. There is huge social change out there, both good and bad.

I'm a strong proponent of marriage because I believe in the old Indian social structure of *kutumb*—of the family being not just your nuclear family but extended family and, therefore, also community and country. It is the basis of stability to which every country aspires. Foreigners envy us and say, 'Look at your families and how you have kept it all together.' I think that's breaking down and, for me, it's definitely a worry.

As an official's daughter you grew up in various parts of the country but it is Mumbai where you came of age and Mumbai that made you. But many people think that this great metropolis has lost its cosmopolitan spirit, its politics are bigoted and it's a city in decline. Do you agree?

You sound like a typical Delhiwala passing judgement on Mumbai with such élan. It isn't a city in decline and I do not agree that it's in a deplorable state. There are deplorable people in this city who are intolerant, who want to kick out anybody who is not a *marathi manoos*. Being *marathi manoos* myself, I can with total confidence say that this is not the average Marathi's feeling. Why should we allow politicians' agendas to give the city a bad name? We still have five hundred families coming to Bombay every day and no one leaves. Yes, the infrastructure of the city really sucks and we have not had the kind of leadership that a city like Mumbai deserves. We have put up with completely inefficient

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governments who have done nothing for the city. I think the party is about to end because the average marathi manoos is not in a mood to tolerate anyone, whether one of their own, or someone thrust on them via Delhi, who continues to give Mumbai such an awful name.

April 2008

Javed Akhtar
Jeffrey Archer
Nadeem Aslam
Chetan Bhagat
Upamanyu Chatterjee
William Dalrymple
Shobhaa Dé
Anita Desai
Kiran Desai
Mahasweta Devi
Umberto Eco
Ken Follett
Patrick French
Amitav Ghosh
Nadine Gordimer
Günter Grass
Ramachandra Guha
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